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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000659

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HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD  
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: STUDENTS BROADEN THEIR AGENDA, CRACKS IN UNITY  
APPEAR

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Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON  
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Student leaders tell us that the university student movement is currently focusing on developing a new generation of leaders, strengthening the Student Parliament, and developing a common platform on political issues rather than street demonstrations. They stress they stand ready to mobilize protests again, should they feel it necessary. They also note that they intend to play a role in the November state and local elections, including participating in the opposition's working groups that will select consensus candidates. Student leaders we have met with are intent on playing a role in national politics, but their divergent personal agendas and interests appear to be chipping away at the supposed unity of the student movement. End Summary.

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More Than Street Protests  
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¶2. (C) Poloffs and visiting Deskoff met May 6 with Jose Caricote and Alejandro Narvaez, University of Aragua student leaders, and Carlos Vargas, a student leader from the Central University of Venezuela (UCV). All three student leaders stressed that Venezuela's student movement is not simply a product of the demonstrations against the government closure of RCTV in May 2007, but rather the result of long-standing organizational efforts on public and private campuses. The RCTV demonstrations and the failed constitutional referendum allowed the students to showcase their organizational capabilities. Caricote said the student movement has intentionally distanced itself from public mobilizations of late to concentrate on developing new leaders. He noted that many of the well-know student leaders, including Yon Goicochea and himself, will graduate soon.

¶3. (C) Caricote, Vargas, and Narvaez also told us that they are focusing on strengthening the 167-member Student Parliament, a student-run coordinating body that includes university students from across the country. According to Caricote, Student Parliament members recently signed a symbolic pact pledging to work together and in the best interests of the student movement. He also said outgoing student leaders have formed a "council of elders" in order to advise their successors in the Student Parliament. (Note: Caricote was previously the third-ranking person in the Student Parliament, after Yon Goicochea and Stalin Gonzalez. The elected leadership of the Student Parliament rotates every four months or so. End Note.)

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Forging a Common Platform  
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14. (C) Narvaez and Vargas outlined their efforts to create a common student platform on political issues. They aspire to forge a sustainable alternative to Chavismo that will generate significant political support, much as university students did in the late 1950's in the transition to democracy. They said student leaders intend to focus public debate on educational reform, university autonomy, the politicization of the judiciary, and the protection of private property. According to the students, political parties have failed to connect with young Venezuelans, and they believe student leaders are well-suited to fill that political vacuum. The students said they contributed to the successful effort to stall President Chavez's efforts to introduce a "Bolivarian" curriculum in public schools. They continue to attend trials in certain politically motivated prosecutions.

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November Elections  
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15. (C) The student leaders expressed mixed feelings about playing an active role in the November elections. They noted that some students are resentful towards candidates whom they believe are trying to take undue credit for the RCTV demonstrations and the outcome of the December 2 elections even though they did not take an active role in the events. They also are wary that being too closely identified with political parties will undermine their credibility. On the other hand, some students feel obligated to help the opposition in order to show their gratitude for the logistical support some opposition parties provided to the

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student movement. Caricote noted that student leaders are participating in opposition working groups set up to select consensus candidates, largely to press for opposition unity. Students are also expected to contribute a significant number of electoral witnesses for the November state and local elections, just as they did in the 2007 constitutional referendum.

16. (C) A small number of student leaders are also running for office. Stalin Gonzalez, for example, may be the opposition's most recognizable candidate for mayor of the Libertador borough of Caracas. Nevertheless, he is widely perceived as running an ineffective campaign so far in what is a Chavista stronghold. Simon Bolivar University (USB) student leader Alexis Cabrera told Poloff May 12 that many student leaders are not old enough (the minimum age is 25) or interested in running in the November elections, but a number of prominent student leaders are considering running for the National Assembly in 2010. Yon Goicochea, for example, has expressed to us his personal interest in running for the National Assembly.

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Into the Barrios  
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17. (C) Other student leaders tell us that they are making the most of the government's requirement that they conduct a long-term community service project in order to receive their diplomas. They perceive this as a real opportunity to generate support for the student movement in traditional pro-government strongholds as well as to gain first-hand experience in trying to address long-standing social problems in Venezuela's barrios. On the other hand, a number of student leaders tell us that student efforts to cross class barriers have been too few and often misguided. They note that many university students tend to project a sense of "noblesse oblige" rather than real solidarity.

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Comment  
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18. (C) To date, the student movement has been more effective in rallying support against anti-democratic government initiatives than it has been in developing and uniting behind a comprehensive political alternative. While individual student leaders are thoughtful and articulate on the democratic deficit in Venezuela, the student movement still appears to lack a common road map and vision for working proactively. The Student Parliament does not function as a truly organized decision-making body, and the creation of an advisory "council of elders" may only fuel further internal divisions.

19. (C) Moreover, the student movement is likely to fracture further as more and more student leaders assume open political roles across a wide political spectrum. Although he has already said he will use the \$500,000 award money from the Cato Institute to start a student leadership foundation, the public attention focused on Yon Goicochea and a handful of other student leaders inevitably generates internal jealousies as well. Nevertheless, the student movement retains widespread credibility and will likely be important to the opposition's ability to field electoral witnesses in the gubernatorial and mayoral election campaigns in November.  
End Comment.

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